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Socioeconomic Dimensions of German Language Proficiency Among Descendants of the Pre-War Population of Masuria: Narratives from Field Research

Introduction

This paper adopts the broadest definition of Masuria which functions in the historical discourse (Gollub, 1934; Kętrzyński, 1872, p. 3; Krosta, 1875, pp. 4–5; Martuszewski, 1976, pp. 469–473; Nitsch, 1925, p. 130; Sembrzycki, 1889, pp. 72–91; Zweck, 1900, p. 1). As understood here, then, the region includes the territory of the following pre-1914 administrative districts (*Kreise*): Ostróda (Osterode), Nidzica (Neidenburg, incl. Działdowo (Soldau)), Szczytno (Ortelsburg), Mrągowo (Sensburg), Giżycko (Lötzen), Pisz (Johannisburg), Elk (Lyck), Olecko (Oletzko), Węgorzewo (Angerbürg), and parts of Gołdap (Goldap) and Kętrzyn (Rastenburg) districts. The area in question had been under the gradually increasing influence of German language and culture since the Teutonic-era colonisation. In the early period of settlement, settlers from German-speaking areas played a significant role, alongside Polish settlers from Mazovia and the Chełmno Land, and internal colonists of Old Prussian origin (Białuński, 2019, pp. 335–348).

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Over time, these settlers underwent Germanisation, as knowledge of German became essential to achieve higher socioeconomic status. This process primarily affected the upper strata of Prussian society, including the noble class (Chojnacki, 1959, p. 5). Lower public officials, the intelligentsia, and those with aspirations for social advancement (and it should be recalled that the majority of the Masurian population were peasants of varying levels of wealth) were increasingly affected by this tendency since the 1830s, when there was a gradual shift from the model of multicultural Prussia – based primarily on the pre-national model of the citizen (a loyal subject of the ruler) – towards a national society with the dominant role of the German language (Jasiński, 1993). This manifested itself in the gradual withdrawal of the Polish language from schools, offices, and churches in Masuria in favour of German.

Knowledge of German also became crucial during times of war (such as the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War), when Masurians served in the German-speaking army, first of the Kingdom of Prussia and later the German Empire. A lack of German proficiency severely limited socioeconomic opportunities, as can be seen, for example, from the memoirs of Wojciech Kętrzyński: Masurians increasingly and willingly formed multilingual communities, with a steadily increasing role and prestige of the German language (Kętrzyński, 1872). The position of German in Masuria was increasing not only as a result of top-down administrative decisions, but also in connection with economic and civilisational changes – the world was becoming smaller and more accessible to Masurians. Those curious about the outside world gained access to German- and Polish-language newspapers in the nineteenth century, and the advent of railways made possible the mass emigration of Masurians (temporary or permanent) to the dynamically industrialising areas in the western part of Germany (mainly Westphalia). It is estimated that up to one in three Masurians left their hometowns and settled in the vicinity of places such as Bochum, Gelsenkirchen, Herne, or Dortmund (Chojnacki, 1975, p. 179). From the contemporary narratives of Masurians, especially those whose families experienced the waves of labour emigration to Westphalia, it can be inferred that this was one of the factors not only behind a better knowledge of German and the attribution of higher prestige to it, but also behind a greater number of Germanisms in the Masurian ethnolect, the unstandardised language of everyday contacts, deriving its roots mainly from the dialects of northern Mazovia (for descriptions of Masurian linguistic features, see Basara, 1987, pp. 24–31; Nitsch, 1954, pp. 252–361).

The plebiscite and post-plebiscite period was particularly important in the process of assimilation of the Masurian population into the German national community. The Masurians – 99% of whom decided in the 1920 plebiscite to remain within the borders of Germany – increasingly felt that they were indeed part of the German nation, also in ethnolinguistic terms (Traba, 2002, pp. 163–180). This was reflected in language practices – Masurian-speaking parents, for both identity and practical

reasons, consciously interrupted the intergenerational transmission of the language, ultimately causing a change in the linguistic environment in which their children grew up. The change could be seen also in religious practices in the interwar period: the Polish-Masurian services became unpopular among the younger generations of Masurians (Neumann, 1931). From then on, and especially after the National Socialist regime took power, parents spoke to their children mainly in German. The grandparents remained the last carriers of memory of the predominantly Masurian-speaking environment, especially in less formalised and less prestigious domains.

The defeat of the Third Reich resulted in a great change in the linguistic environment: Masuria became a part of post-war, communist Poland. Masurians, especially the younger ones, raised before and during the war, were not familiar with Standard Polish or even Masurian; their only language was Hochdeutsch, or sometimes, in the north of the region, Low German, which was disappearing under the pressure of Hochdeutsch. After the war, almost all domains of public life underwent an accelerated process of Polonisation. The only domain in which the changes were not so rapid and brutal was the religious sphere. The Protestant churches in Masuria operated under concession of the communist authorities (before the war more than 90% of Masurians were Protestants of various denominations; for an analysis of statistics, see Belzyt, 1996, pp. 35–71) and had a certain autonomy of action: they intended to carry out the linguistic Polonisation of this sphere of life over a somewhat extended period (Bażanowski, 2020, pp. 43–45). German was still spoken in homes and at gatherings with relatives and acquaintances with pre-war East Prussian roots.

It is important to note the unfavourable, discriminatory atmosphere affecting the German-speaking population of Masuria, both state-sanctioned discrimination and that created by new settlers who had fresh memories of the Nazi occupation. Particularly in the early days of the Polish People's Republic, the native population faced repressions and acts of intolerance owing to the use of the German language and religious differences. The memories of older living descendants of the indigenous population include accounts of beatings or arrests of local residents speaking German in public due to denunciations or when they were overheard by state functionaries (for more on the authorities' attitude towards Germans in Warmia and Masuria, see Letko, 2016, pp. 147–157; Warot, 2016, pp. 460–475).

The atmosphere of terror and uncertainty was also fuelled by the brutally conducted national verification campaign (signing the so-called *Masurenschein*, a declaration of Polish ethnicity and acceptance of Polish citizenship), which was met with passive resistance by thousands of indigenous residents, who felt German or Masurian. Those who did not pass the verification were deported to Germany, while some others decided to leave as they were unable to accept the current situation in the region, the change of borders, and harassment (Belzyt, 1998). Later waves of departures, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, were increasingly motivated by the desire

to improve one's livelihood. The community, which numbered between 400,000 and 500,000 people before the war (of whom about 250,000 still spoke Masurian in 1900), had shrunk to less than 10,000 by the end of the 1970s (Bażanowski, 2020, p. 231; Belzyt, 1984; Sakson, 1987, pp. 483–491, 2001, pp. 11–38).

Those who stayed had no access to German-language education or media. Until the late 1980s, the use of German remained more of a source of shame and created a risk of exposure to acts of violence and intolerance. A factor of social advancement in Masuria before the war, knowledge of German became a risk factor after the war. Nevertheless, some members of the Masurian population maintained the intergenerational transmission of German, at least to some extent. On the eve of the fall of communism and the fall of the Iron Curtain, active and passive command of German remained quite common in general Masurian population, and at least partial, passive knowledge of the language persisted among younger generations, which facilitated a possible decision to return to the use of German for economic or identity reasons. The process of restoring its prestige and usefulness in social and economic life was supported by the newly established German minority associations throughout Masuria (Czesła, 2002, pp. 95–110; Domagała, 1996, 1999). These organisations offered German language courses, often free of charge for their members.

Aim and methods of the study

This article makes use of material from semi-structured and unstructured interviews conducted over the past few years with descendants of indigenous Masurians residing in Poland (at least for a significant part of the year). The aim is to examine their beliefs and narratives about their contemporary use of German and the usefulness of these language practices in public domains. Apart from quotations from the interviews, I also refer to my own observations and notes, including those made during participant observation. The data obtained are a part of my unpublished PhD dissertation defended in 2023. The field research was conducted in two stages: 2019–2020 and 2021–2022, with some additional interviews held in early 2023. In total, I interviewed more than 50 descendants of the pre-war population of Masuria; 48 interviews were later transcribed. All interviews were conducted in Polish with only small inclusions in German.

The data were collected using a mixed method: the semi-structured interview (supported by a simple questionnaire which was not made available to the interviewee) and, when possible, the narrative interview. The interviews aimed to reveal not only the declared course of the interviewees' lives – taking into account the language situation in the community and Masurian families during the respective periods – but also their contemporary language practices, ideologies, and beliefs.

The participants were selected using the snowball sampling method (Babbie, 2021, pp. 193–194), which made it possible to contact people diverse in terms of gender, religion, identity orientation, district of origin/residence, and the linguistic codes they use. Since the study was qualitative rather than quantitative in nature, the purpose of the snowball sampling method was to capture certain patterns and tendencies within the indigenous Masurian community, not to obtain statistically representative results. The people who helped form the aforementioned “snowballs” are respected figures within the target group (e.g. Lutheran clergy, members of parish council, local activists from the Masurian community, members of German minority associations). The study revealed an overrepresentation of women (28 women, 20 men), an overrepresentation of individuals over seventy years old (23 participants, several of whom were over ninety at the time), and an underrepresentation of those under forty (5 participants). The difficulties in reaching younger interviewees were mainly related to their lack of time, lack of interest, or lack of confidence in their own knowledge of Masurian dialect and cultural heritage.

The research hypothesis was that nowadays, in contrast to the communist period, at least partial intergenerational transmission of German (active and/or passive), and thus Polish-German bilingualism, is an opportunity for descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of Masuria to gain considerable advantages in various spheres of public life (economic, social activities, education), and that it is an opportunity which they actively pursue. The use of German in language practices of some of those interviewed has become one of the ways of increasing their competitiveness and improving their socioeconomic status.

I will analyse the participants’ personal narratives related to the contemporary use of German in the three spheres discussed in the article: (1) occupational – understood mainly as (a) working in Poland in the tourism sector and other sectors (or entities) taking advantage of more intensive economic cooperation with Germany; (b) working in Germany: seasonal or permanent work, e.g. several-year contracts without the intention of permanent emigration; (2) educational: use of German-language academic sources, high grades in German and thus higher overall average of school grades; (3) non-governmental organisations: involvement in efforts aiming to obtain funds from Germany for statutory activities and projects run by German minority associations.

I decided to include numerous and extensive quotations from transcribed and anonymised conversations on specific types of language practices related to the use of German in the aforementioned domains, believing in the validity of a more emic attitude towards minority communities living in Poland, i.e. giving voice to members of marginalised groups themselves, also in the sense of adopting subjective interpretation and classification of phenomena.

The data used in this article are anonymised; the quotations are referenced as follows: participant's gender (M – male; F – female); district of origin of their ancestors (E – Elk; G – Giżycko; M – Mrągowo; N – Nidzica; O – Ostróda; Olc – Olecko; P – Pisz; Sz – Szczytno; O/N etc. – more than one district); participant's age by decade; in some cases, an additional reference number has been added to distinguish between participants with the same reference details (e.g. M-O-70-2). The extensive anonymisation of the data (personal names, place names, and occupational details were removed) was my conscious decision: I intended to increase the interviewee's sense of security and make their identification more difficult, but at the same time provide the basic context (gender, the ancestors' district of origin, approximate age), allowing the reader to interpret the data and immerse themselves in the submitted narratives.

According to Helena Krasowska, linguistic biography is “a set of facts from the life of a specific multilingual person related to the ways and conditions of acquiring languages and then using them in various life situations in various spheres of communication” (Krasowska, 2022, p. 298). One of the basic methods for obtaining information about an individual's linguistic past, their experiences, assessments, and transformations, is the narrative interview, proposed by Fritz Schütze (1983, pp. 283–293) and considered to be a useful tool for sociolinguistic research by scholars such as Harry Hermanns (1987, pp. 43–56). Rita Franceschini and Johanna Miecznikowski refer to linguistic biography as a product of narratively created autobiography (Franceschini & Miecznikowski, 2004, pp. vii–xxi). The model scenario for a narrative interview is a long, even several-hour-long monologue of the participant, followed by additional questions asked by the researcher (Każmierska, 2016, pp. 61–72). However, my experience indicates the opposite pattern: a large proportion of the participants expected a discussion and/or auxiliary questions which would give them an opportunity to formulate concise, precise statements, and only after some time the conversations evolved into narrative monologues.

Language practices are briefly defined by Bernard Spolsky as the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up the linguistic repertoire of a speech community (Spolsky, 2004, p. 5). The term is also captured in a simple, popular, yet elegant way on the website *Our Languages* (a joint project run by King's College London's Centre for Language, Discourse and Communication and English for Action), which explains that language practices are

[w]hat people actually do with language in day to day life in different settings, contexts and domains. Language practices describe how we routinely use the linguistic resources we have in different situations in our lives. This can include our choice of sounds, words, grammar, formality, politeness, variety, style etc. (*Sociolinguistics & ESOL: Key Concepts*, n.d.)

On the one hand, language choices influence language practices and are correlated with social roles; on the other hand, an individual can negotiate and (re)construct his or her roles through language choices (Pahta et al., 2010, p. 1). However, these choices should not be understood as completely free acts or unrestrained decisions. In principle, they coincide with the *appropriate* use of language (Fishman, 1972, p. 435; Martin-Jones, 1989, pp. 106–125).

Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska writes that language practices are not an isolated phenomenon, but are closely connected with cultural practices; she postulates that in the minority context they “should be interpreted not as speech acts per se, but as practices rooted in the history and social-political-cultural context of the respective groups” (Dołowy-Rybińska, 2017/2020, p. 24). However, it should be remembered that declared language practices may differ from actual ones (Roberts, 2021, p. 159).

Linguistic beliefs about a given code (including one’s own language) can be both positive and negative (Cooper & Fishman, 1974, p. 8). Positive beliefs shared by the community of language users may be the key to its persistence, development, and cultivation. In the case of endangered languages, linguistic solidarity is of great importance (Bradley, 2002, p. 7). Negative beliefs about people using linguistic codes other than our own may be related to the association of a given code or features of a given person’s language with social class, ethnic origin, or social status (Garrett, 2007, pp. 117–118). Both positive and negative linguistic beliefs can affect the vitality and level of use of a given language in a community.

1. German language skills and the tourism industry in the light of the study

Since at least the 1990s, the Masurian community has actively utilised German language skills in the tourism sector, particularly to accommodate visitors displaced from Masuria shortly after the Second World War, who most often do not speak Polish, and those who emigrated later on, until the late 1970s. Interviewees noted that interactions with the latter frequently involved code-mixing and code-switching. Some visitors, despite understanding Polish, consciously chose to communicate only in German – either for reasons of identity or due to a lack of confidence in their Polish language skills. According to some participants of the study, such tourists often gained confidence after a few days, using a mixed Polish-Masurian code infused with German influences.

Former residents of the region, as described by the interviewees, were drawn to services provided by the remaining pre-war East Prussian population for various reasons beyond linguistic convenience. These included a sense of solidarity

and shared heritage, an appreciation for the security and understanding offered by individuals familiar with their sentimental attachment to the region, and an absence of fear of discrimination. This blend of cultural and emotional connections underscores the ongoing significance of linguistic and social ties in the tourism sector in Masuria.

Participants highlighted that, despite the undeniable socioeconomic importance of this type of tourism, the proportion of such visits has been steadily declining. The younger generations of descendants of native Masurians, born and raised in Germany, often no longer feel a profound connection to Masuria. Simultaneously, the generations born and raised in their ancestral homeland are gradually passing away, which further contributes to the decline in this form of heritage-driven tourism.

The most common activities of the participants involved in tourism included running small guesthouses, working in local museums, and guiding tours. Across all these tourism-related roles, they consistently emphasised the advantages of German language proficiency. Notably, more than one-fifth of the participants were employed in tourism-related jobs.

One of them creatively used German, particularly in ordinary conversation but also when reciting East Prussian poems and sayings she had learned in her youth. She deliberately incorporated distinctive East Prussian phonetic features to enhance the experience, aiming to immerse visitors in an idealised, idyllic vision of East Prussia – drawing on the topos of the “lost paradise”. Reflecting on tourists’ reactions, she remarked:

Those Germans, when they sat in the boat, they cried; their tears were flowing. (F-M-80)

Another interviewee shared that he used German daily in his work but observed that the German spoken by some guests, particularly older ones, exhibited distinct East Prussian dialectal features and numerous influences from the Masurian ethnolect. He noted that this linguistic style closely resembled the German spoken by his mother.

Well, at work I do [speak German], with German tourists, of course. [...] I was reminded that my mother, when some guests from Germany came to us, she spoke German and often there were just these Masurian words [mixed in]. And she used many [of these] words when speaking German. She would mix [the languages] in one sentence; it was half-Masurian [half-German]. She thought it was proper German! They didn't really know what she was talking about, how could they know? Unless they were locals [who spoke a similar language], then they knew. Well, it also happened to me here; some older men came here and spoke German; there were two-three Masurian words in every sentence. (M-M-50)

One of the interviewees coped with the economic crisis and unemployment in Masuria during the 1990s by working as a guide for German-speaking tours. Similarly, from other conversations, it became evident that proficiency in German

frequently allowed individuals to develop survival strategies during periods of uncertainty, providing them with opportunities to secure income and adapt to challenging circumstances.

Well, I can say that in the 1990s German saved my life. (M-O-70-2)

At some stage, this participant noticed that his use of German, characterised by a number of East Prussian dialectal words, occasionally resulted in misunderstandings with tourists. This made him use standard German, at least in public settings:

There are very few people who remember [the dialect]. I also used these words from time to time, but people didn't understand me, so I switched. For example (I will say it in Polish): "Now we have a tour of Gdańsk, we still have two hours left and you can go [for a walk]; we have free time now; you can still walk until 4 p.m." [If I said it in German] That would be: we have "Zeit zur freie Verfügung", but I said: "Jetzt gennen wir plachandern." "Plachandern" was something my mum used to say at home! And they stood there and they didn't know what it was about! Such a simple example: "plachandern". (M-O-70-2)

For one of the interviewees, running a guesthouse has made her dream of having a property in Masuria come true. She receives numerous guests, mostly from Germany, so she is able to cover maintenance costs and spend the warmer half of the year in her native region:

Well, and it has become such a "Traum" [dream], hasn't it? One that I'm living, not dreaming, just living. [...] And this is my Masurian life. (F-G-40)

The participant quoted below, while guiding German-speaking tours, vividly described the Masurian experience of living in Poland as a small and highly dispersed community. His narratives educated tourists about the historical context while also challenging misconceptions held by some visitors regarding the supposed total absence of Masurians in Masuria. Notably, his accounts were infused with a striking poetics, as he drew a poignant comparison between the situation of the Masurians and the ethnocide of Native Americans:

When I was working, I worked as a guide for German tours. [...] And when a tour came, I introduced myself – that my name was so-and-so and that I was the last of the Mohicans here. [laughter] There was consternation... And I say, "Well, not really; there are still some around, not all of us left for Germany." [The tourists asked:] "Weren't they erased?" "No," I say, "they were not erased... [laughter] unlike the Indians. On the other hand, they left for social reasons, family reasons; they left for Germany by their own decision, even quite often..." (M-N-70)

2. German language skills as a communication tool used during labour emigration

For many of my interviewees, particularly those born in the 1960s and 1970s, travelling to Germany for work has been a common experience. Among the descendants of the pre-war Masurian population born during these decades, such labour migration represents a distinct generational phenomenon. While some interviewees continue to travel periodically to Germany for work, others have discontinued this lifestyle, often after a period of time or upon accumulating sufficient savings to improve their socioeconomic status in Poland.

Many participants emphasised that they learned “true German” during their time in Germany or at Polish schools, distinguishing it from the East Prussian linguistic traits passed down by their ancestors.

Well... my oldest sister is the least [familiar with German]. But she also [speaks it]... My sister lived like me for a long time; we lived together in Germany, in [name of a city], and my older sister went there to take care [of elderly people]; she also brushed up on German there. My brother, well, when he was studying, he learned German well at the university. Well, and also at work. He used it all the time. Well, now he uses it also at work, because he works abroad. (F-G-40-2)

As far as German is concerned... I simply had to learn it because of my circumstances. [...] I practically learned German while living in Germany. Because here the reality was that there was Russian at school... later a little bit of English at university. The reality of the labour market in Poland when I graduated... I met a friend, he came here for Christmas, so we made a deal [to go together to Germany]. So I just went. Another friend was already in Germany working on a farm, and when you come alone, you need to know some basics [of the language]. (M-O/N-50)

For one of my interviewees, German has become an additional tool for communication with colleagues, despite residing in Denmark. His company employs a significant number of German-speaking staff, prompting the interviewee to prioritise developing proficiency in German over continuing his study of Danish. While the participant acknowledges the practical utility of German in a business context, he also cites more identity-oriented motivations:

I work in a Danish company, but mainly with Germans, and every week someone asks me if I can speak German. I was so annoyed that I couldn't, that I decided to quit learning Danish and started looking for an online course to learn German remotely while living in Denmark. That's the attitude I have. I'd like to speak German because I think it would be very useful for me, both from a cultural point of view – it would help me better understand various Masurian issues – and also in business. That's my perspective. (M-O/N-20)

It is worth noting that not all descendants of native Masurians maintained a strong connection to the German language and identity. This was often attributed to experiences of discrimination during childhood in the post-war period or to the influence of anti-German sentiment propagated through media and education. However, in recent years, even within families previously sceptical of Germanness for these reasons, a shift in attitude has been observed. This change is often driven by the recognition of personal benefits associated with the use of the German language.

I used to speak German quite well, but if you don't use it, you forget it. I can more or less understand when someone speaks German to me, but I have trouble speaking it myself. My brother, on the other hand, was incredibly resistant. He used to say, "I will never in my life speak the language of the enemy!" But then he moved to Germany, and I still laugh at him to this day. I say, "Weren't you the one who swore you'd never speak the language of the enemy?" [laughter]. (F-P/M/E-50)

Another narrative emerging in families with weaker identity ties to Germanness involves stories of disinterest in the German language or a perceived language barrier, despite exposure to it during childhood, for instance, through grandparents. For the interviewee quoted below, this language barrier contributed to unsuccessful emigration, feelings of alienation, and an eventual return to Poland. This case also highlights the disruption of intergenerational language transmission. Nevertheless, the interviewee notes that although her children did not have the opportunity to learn German at home, they will still be required to study the language at school.

My daughters will learn German. Willingly or unwillingly. But no, not from me, I don't know it very well myself, I only picked up some words, like how to count and a few other things, but it... wasn't interesting to me. I didn't have to learn it, so I didn't. [...] I cannot even repeat some words properly. When I was in Germany, even in the shop, I tried to talk to the locals to practise a little, you know? Just to get along, because I stayed there for about three or four months, so I had to slowly start managing on my own. They laughed at me so much [laughter], they instantly knew that I wasn't from there, not from Germany. And I kept trying. [...] I couldn't say things the way they did. Well, with the [right] accent. I couldn't say it like that. They knew right away that I was from Poland, and I think I stayed there for about four months, and then I ran back home. I prefer it here. (F-G-30)

My field observations indicate that even within families with a strong tradition of using German, some members of younger generations – particularly those born in the 1980s and later – showed limited interest in the language during childhood. They often failed to perceive its practical utility or potential identity-related significance, despite its presence in family language practices. However, interest in the language often increased in adulthood, typically as a consequence of decisions to emigrate.

Now my daughter works in Germany, right? When I told her to study at home – forget it! But now that she needs it for work, she has to use it. And how many times did I tell her to learn it? You see, I was right – it would have been useful! (F-Olc-60)

The situation differs in families with a strong German identity, where intergenerational language transmission and a positive attitude towards bilingualism have been preserved. In these cases, the generation that acquired German through everyday interactions with their parents as part of family life now utilises this linguistic competence in the labour market.

All my children and grandchildren, they all know German. [...] My son works more in Germany than here [in Poland]. (F-G/O-80)

In some cases, members of younger generations make a deliberate decision to ensure the intergenerational transmission of the language, motivated by the intention to leverage it in the labour market in the future.

My nephew's daughter, she keeps saying, "Uncle, teach me German." Well, I've already taught her quite a lot. (M-G-80)

3. Polish-German bilingualism and working as a Polish-German teacher or translator (in professional and semi-professional contexts)

The field research and participant observation confirmed the hypothesis I proposed prior to the study regarding the tendency of a significant proportion of descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of Masuria to leverage their knowledge of German for professional purposes. This includes teaching German for profit or working as Polish-German translators or interpreters. For example, the daughter of Interviewee F-G/O-80, a native Polish-German bilingual, pursued a degree in German studies – a field that, based on my observations, is relatively popular among descendants of Masurian people and frequently recurs in Masurian families.

Furthermore, it was common for interviewees or their family members to engage in interpreting or translating on a casual, ad-hoc basis. Such work was often commissioned by companies or local governments, which viewed native knowledge of German as a sufficient qualification for the translation process, even without formal certification.

All four communes in the district were hiring me [...], because I had to write letters to Germany for them, to various East Prussian organisations and communities that had been established. These contacts between Polish and German towns were part of what was called a partnership programme. I played a significant role in all of this. (M-N-70)

In the case of this interviewee, the long hours spent working as a Polish-German interpreter temporarily affected the language of her thought processes. This, in turn, led to the unintended use of German in conversations with interlocutors where such practices had never previously occurred.

They wanted us to go to different places and interpret, right? We were driving around, and then, really, sometimes... when I forgot [that I should speak Polish], I even started talking to my husband in German. (F-Olc-60)

According to the narration of Interviewee M-O/N-20, knowledge of German had a practical application in his grandmother's life, as she was making translations of texts. However, as someone deeply traumatised, his grandmother refrained from using German in public settings. Furthermore, she made significant efforts to conceal her origin when speaking Polish. A recurring motif among descendants of Masurians is the meticulous care taken to ensure the grammatical and stylistic correctness of their Polish – a practice often tied to a sense of pride in their linguistic competence.

Grandma understands German. She even translated various texts from German to Polish and vice versa. However, she doesn't speak German – or at least she doesn't admit that she can. It seems to stem from some internal trauma she experienced, which makes her completely deny it. To be honest, I've talked to her to understand the reasons. I know that when she was young, for a long time, she pronounced the German "r", like many Masurians did. She practised so hard to overcome it that now she has the most beautiful Polish I've ever heard. In fact, it's perfect Polish – pure, like the way actors speak it. (M-O/N-20)

German language teaching among descendants of the pre-war population is not always limited to highly formalised or professionalised activities. Many descendants also conduct supplementary courses, such as those organised by German minority organisations, and offer private lessons. According to my research, German associations run courses for children in several towns across the region, placing significant emphasis on imparting German language skills to the youngest members of the community. The motivation behind these initiatives extends beyond preserving ethnic distinctiveness to include equipping individuals with competences that are advantageous in the labour market:

The next generations, the children... well, my granddaughter is learning German. She understands a lot and wants to learn, but most children don't really want to. It's a big, huge mistake. English is essential in Europe, and the second most important language after it is German. When they go to work or move to another country, they'll wish they had at least learned a foreign language. (M-O-70)

The issue of finding qualified instructors, however, can sometimes prove challenging. One of my interlocutors from the north-eastern part of the region agreed to

teach German pro bono for an association operating there. She acknowledged that others with higher qualifications were available but unwilling to dedicate their time. Despite her efforts, the learning group disbanded after several meetings.

In contrast, Interviewee F-O-70 considered her language skills inadequate and declined offers to collaborate with a similar group, despite encouragement from Polish friends and institutions. This highlights the varying levels of confidence and willingness among potential instructors in such contexts.

“Perhaps you’d like to teach German here at the Third Age University?” And I said, “I don’t have time,” and then added, “I don’t know the grammar that well.” Because there’s “in”, “im”, or “den”, “dem”, right? That’s the hardest part, isn’t it? (F-O-70)

4. Knowledge of German as a secondary competence in the Polish labour market

In the participants’ narratives, fluency in German was often described as a significant advantage in the recruitment process, increasing the likelihood of securing a position that ensured high socioeconomic status (Interviewee F-G-80). Additionally, in some cases, native-level German proficiency made it difficult for employers to find suitable replacements, creating an atmosphere of irreplaceability around the employee. This, in turn, prompted management to actively encourage the employee to extend their contract with the organisation (Interviewee F-O-70):

I spoke German with my mother, and when my son went to my sister’s place on holiday, the other children didn’t speak Polish, so he had to communicate with them in German. That’s how he learned German while staying with my sister. Later, when there was no work here, he went to Warsaw to look for a job. He found an ad in the newspaper stating that [name of the company] needed someone fluent in German and English. He has now been in England for a year, still improving his English. He was chosen out of eight candidates. He’s still working there, over twenty-five years later, and is now a manager [...]. (F-G-80)

Everyone knew that because of my name... that I was German. There was a time when the Polish-German Foundation was active, and people were receiving large compensations for working for the Germans during the war. [...] There was this one case – a lady came to me with a letter from the Red Cross, written in German. I took it, even though I had never formally learned German, but I understood it, right? I read it, and she said to me, “This letter says exactly how much you should add to my pension.” I replied, “Do you know German?” She said, “Well, yes, I’ve read it, and it says so. Please add it to my pension as soon as possible.” I didn’t know the manager was standing behind me. It annoyed me, so I said to her, “Do you think idiots work at [name of the office]? That we don’t know the language? Surely you went to a translator with this letter, and the translator told you exactly what’s written there. It says they are still looking for him [the German who employed Polish forced labourers],

they haven't found him yet, but as soon as they do, they'll notify you. And please don't come here with such letters anymore." Later, when I was about to leave my job, the manager said: "Why don't you stay, at least for one more year?" (F-O-70)

German also proves useful in creative freelance work (Interviewee M-P/M-40) and, to a lesser extent, in technical industry roles (Interviewee F-Olc/P-60). In both cases, access to a wealth of German-language source materials plays a crucial role, enabling professionals to move beyond reliance on exclusively Polish-language resources. Notably, a modern approach to utilising intermediate language proficiency, acquired informally at home by a member of the younger generation, has emerged (Interviewee M-P/M-40). Here, German is primarily employed for the initial verification of materials.

It's basically useful for researching materials. I'm somewhat familiar with German, and even though I often use online translators for convenience – at least for the initial selection of texts in libraries – it helps me assess whether the material might be useful for me. In that sense, the German language comes in handy. (M-P/M-40)

Currently, I rarely use German at work – mainly when I download a professional book from the Internet. (F-Olc/P-60)

5. The German language in regional non-governmental organisations

Numerous non-governmental organisations in Masuria, including those representing the German minority, regional organisations, and associations of local intelligentsia, enthusiasts of the region, its history, and heritage, play a significant role in fostering connections with entities operating in Germany. Through participatory observation, I found that many descendants of the indigenous population still residing in Masuria actively participate in these cross-border interactions. They often act as intermediaries between Polish regionalists and the descendants of East Prussian communities living in Germany, who often communicate exclusively in German. Their linguistic skills prove invaluable across various domains: organising activities, securing funding, collaborating on heritage preservation, and hosting and guiding German partners in efforts to maintain the region's unique character.

The most extensive use of German occurs within associations of the German minority in Masuria. Their activities frequently involve informal or semi-formal communication in German, as well as fully formalised use of the language in official contexts, such as corresponding with consulates, German state representatives, and ministries that provide funding for their initiatives. However, it is important to note that these responsibilities are often undertaken by selected representatives and their

collaborators. As a result, these experiences may not be representative of the broader membership of German minority associations.

All the reports have to be done in German, and I handle them myself. One time, a professor came, and I said, "Well, the worst thing about German is the grammar," and he replied, "Even Germans make mistakes, so you can too!" (F-O-70)

Now I write it in Polish first, and then, with the help of a dictionary, I translate it slowly, little by little. They say I'm already doing a good job. (F-O-70)

[I use German] every day, because there are phone calls, and I also have to write emails, read emails, or handle some letters that arrive, we have contacts with the consulate and so on... (M-O-70)

Establishing informal, flexible connections, fostering networks, and overcoming barriers or distrust between partners through the use of a common language holds significant importance. Organisations such as associations of the German minority, which actively promote both formal and informal bilingual practices, contribute positively to the social capital of the region. However, interviewees emphasise that sustaining bilingualism demands additional effort and encouragement, highlighting the challenges of maintaining language skills across generations and within diverse social contexts.

In our conversations, we sometimes use German and sometimes Polish; it depends. If we have guests, we talk in German. When we're among ourselves, it's a mix of German and Polish. There are also people who only know Polish. (M-O/N-50)

What annoys me sometimes is that among us, Polish is spoken as well, right? I say, "Listen, especially if we have guests from Germany, let's speak in German." (M-O-70)

6. Benefits in the educational process resulting from the bilingualism of descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of Masuria

During informal conversations with Masurians, I frequently encountered similar recollections from individuals belonging to generations who attended schools and universities after the political transformation of 1989, when German was more widely introduced as a compulsory foreign language. The greatest advantages of having learned German at home included exemptions from exams and tests, ease in achieving high grades in the subject, and, at the university level, the ability to access and utilise German-language resources.

I had no problem with German. For five years in technical school, I was held up as an example of someone who spoke German beautifully. How could I not know German? It had been spoken around me since I was a child. [...] We spoke German with my mother, my

aunt, and my uncle. Although they spoke German less often than they used to, when they sat together, they sang. My mother or my aunt – sometimes both – would sing in German. (M-N-60)

Most often, I need German for texts required for my studies. We are often asked, for example, to compare the German version with the Polish version. That's when I use my knowledge of German. Sometimes, I also look things up on the Internet. When it comes to topics related to our region, I prefer to check sources like German Wikipedia [more than Polish sources] [laughter]. (M-M-20)

Conclusion

To conclude, the German language emerges in the narratives of many interviewees as a valuable tool in socio-economically significant domains such as tourism, business, corporate employment, freelance work, social activities, and education. Language practices associated with these areas are described as relatively free and unrestrained. These narratives depict the use of German as beneficial and, compared to the period from 1945 to 1989, less stigmatising. During that earlier period, systemic and grassroots hostility or discrimination from state institutions and fellow citizens was a common experience, according to participants.

Following the fall of communism, many individuals actively sought to maintain or develop their German language skills, recognising its potential not only for economic gain but also for accruing social capital and knowledge. Young members of families that demonstrated greater consistency in intergenerational language transmission, despite facing negative consequences during the Polish People's Republic, reaped more benefits in the democratic era than those who ceased passing on the language.

In the light of these narratives, bilingual residents of the region enjoyed distinct advantages over the general population after 1989. They were better positioned to connect with German-speaking clients, secure jobs requiring fluency in German, or find seasonal employment in Germany to support themselves and their families. Consequently, the current multilingual practices of descendants of the original Masurian population should be viewed as a positive phenomenon, contributing both to individual well-being and the broader development of the region.

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Socioeconomic Dimensions of German Language Proficiency Among Descendants of the Pre-War Population of Masuria: Narratives from Field Research

Abstract

This paper examines the ways of using the German language by descendants of pre-war inhabitants of Masuria. A series of semi-structured and unstructured interviews (over 50, 48 of which were transcribed) conducted during field research throughout Masuria showed that the higher proficiency in German, or at least a less negative attitude towards German compared to the general population of the region, resulted in better socioeconomic chances after the collapse of communism in Poland. Many descendants of pre-war Masurians have used the knowledge of German in education, business, teaching, translation, and NGOs, giving them better chances to adapt to the new, capitalist economy. It was particularly important in the 1990s and 2000s, when Masuria suffered high unemployment rates. The field research was conducted using multiple snowball sampling in Lutheran parishes, German minority organisations and regional NGOs, and local communities.

Keywords: Masurians; German minority in Poland; language practices and biographies; bilingualism

Socjoekonomiczny wymiar znajomości języka niemieckiego wśród potomków przedwojennej ludności Mazur. Narracje z badań terenowych

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia sposoby wykorzystywania języka niemieckiego przez potomków przedwojennych mieszkańców Mazur. Seria wywiadów półustrukturyzowanych i nieustrukturyzowanych (ponad 50, z czego 48 zostało przetranskrybowanych) przeprowadzonych w ramach badań terenowych na Mazurach wykazała, że biegłość w języku niemieckim lub przynajmniej przychylniejszy stosunek do języka niemieckiego w porównaniu do ogólnej populacji regionu przekładały się na lepsze szanse społeczno-ekonomiczne po upadku komunizmu w Polsce. Wielu potomków przedwojennych Mazurów wykorzystywało znajomość języka niemieckiego w biznesie, edukacji, tłumaczeniach oraz pracach organizacji pozarządowych, zwiększając swoje szanse adaptacji do nowej, kapitalistycznej gospodarki. Było to szczególnie istotne w latach dziewięćdziesiątych XX i pierwszej dekadzie XXI wieku, kiedy Mazury borykały się z wysoką stopą bezrobocia. Badania terenowe zostały przeprowadzone przy wielokrotnym użyciu metody kuli śnieżnej w parafiach luterańskich, organizacjach mniejszości niemieckiej, regionalnych organizacjach pozarządowych oraz lokalnych społecznościach.

Słowa kluczowe: Mazurzy; mniejszość niemiecka w Polsce; praktyki i biografie językowe; dwujęzyczność

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